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Chile: Looking for a Scapegoat?

President Pinochet appears to be under growing fire from junta members and high military officers over charges of Chilean complicity in the Letelier murder case, which is having damaging repercussions domestically and internationally.

The abrupt resignation of former intelligence chief General Manuel Contreras from his post as commander of the Army Engineering Corps on Tuesday may be calculated to get Pinochet's government off the hook, but it could backfire. If Contreras is implicated, it will be difficult for Pinochet to escape guilt by association since the former secret police chief has been one of the President's closest collaborators.

Contreras was ousted as acting head of the National Intelligence Center last November. At that time, and apparently with considerable reluctance, Pinochet bowed to pressure from civilian advisers and senior military officers who disliked Contreras and implied that he was a distinct liability to the government. The intelligence apparatus had been reorganized and renamed shortly before Contreras was promoted to general and shifted to the less important army post. His influence with the President remained intact despite the setback. For instance, Pinochet dispatched Contreras as a special emissary to discuss the Beagle Channel dispute with Argentine President Videla in January.

Most of the excesses that evoked strident criticism of Chilean human rights practices occurred while the security service was Contreras' domain. If the trail in the Letelier investigation has led to Contreras, Pinochet will find it hard to absolve himself, and he may face strong reaction within the armed forces--possibly including some plotting against him.

Junta member and Air Force commander General Leigh, whose relations with Pinochet have grown increasingly

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strained, is already sniping at the President for his handling of the Letelier matter, [REDACTED] Some senior Army officers are also expressing concern about the impact of the investigation on the image of the Chilean armed forces.

There are no signs that dissatisfaction with Pinochet is widespread within the military, and Leigh is likely to keep his criticisms within acceptable bounds until further evidence is available on the Letelier affair. While the Air Force chief considers himself an alternative to Pinochet, he has no firm base of support and the Army is unlikely to side with him in a move to supplant the President.

Pinochet may yet ride out the storm if his government can divert blame or refute charges that it was involved somehow in the assassination. But if a seriously incriminating linkage emerges, finessing will be hard. In any case, the political costs to the regime will probably be high. If the government fails to extricate itself from this affair, Pinochet may for the first time find his position precarious and his power open to challenge. [REDACTED]

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